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Letter dated 12 December 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Honduras to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit to you herewith the speech given by Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga to the National Congress of Honduras on 8 December 2003 (see annex), which contains an address to mankind on the challenges of poverty in the field of development, and how to combat it, considered within the context of the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations.

I should be grateful if you would have the speech circulated as a document of the United Nations under item 60 of the agenda of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly.

(*Signed*) Manuel **Acosta Bonilla**
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Annex to the letter dated 12 December 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Honduras to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Do not forget the poor

I should like to take this opportunity to share some thoughts that are very dear to my heart, and which take on a special resonance in this place, where the problems of our beloved Honduras are so often debated.

My theme today is one of the oldest known to mankind. It is a recurrent theme — one that lies hidden, and vanishes, only to reappear suddenly with a new face, to present us with new challenges.

I truly believe that my mission over the past 25 years has been to act as a "bridge", or "bridge maker", one who constantly seeks to link two shores; one who refuses to see mankind as the irreconcilable manifestation of two worlds. I see and conceive the social doctrine of the Church as a channel for the course of history, and I believe that I have suffered and struggled in order that all Hondurans may live together as brothers, and as children of the same God and Father.

When the Apostles founded the first Christian communities, they said to the Bishops: "Please, do not forget the poor".

We know all too well that some 60 per cent of the world's population suffer from poverty; that a scandalous number of people die of hunger — or worse, of thirst; that the lack of vaccines, costing 10 cents at most, causes the deaths of thousands, if not millions of people; that in many parts of the world there are people — and many people — who have literally gone back to living in caves; that the lack of housing and social security is an outrage; that there are millions upon millions of human beings who exist without dreams; without future plans, because their lives are a constant struggle simply to survive.

The experts — those whose job it is to calculate the price of poverty for their fellow human beings — say that the poor are those who earn less than a dollar a day.

And yet, I believe that if we look each other squarely in the eyes, we will have to agree that "the end of innocence" is upon us. We simply cannot deceive ourselves any longer. I serve a Lord who has given us a far more precise formula for recognizing the problem — one that has nothing to do with statistics.

Let us listen carefully: "For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger you took me into your home, when naked you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help, when in prison you visited me".

This passage describes every possible form of poverty, and teaches us how to respond in each case. None of those forms is "intellectual", or "rhetorical". My Lord — our Lord — is simple and direct, and leaves no room for doubt. It admits no alternative!

The Lord Jesus Christ is the one great revolutionary figure. Nobody talks in terms of "before Caesar", or "after Caesar"; of "before Napoleon", or "after Napoleon"; or of "before Marx", or "after Marx", but we all talk about "before

Christ" and "after Christ", because the Lord Jesus Christ gave us new points of reference; he changed the way we see ourselves.

"Before Christ and after Christ!" That is the key.

What does Christ contribute to history? A very great deal indeed! This morning, however, allow me to focus on two points: one, love of peace; and two, love of one's neighbour!

The two are inseparable. There can be no love of peace without love for one's neighbour, and vice versa.

And beneath it all lies the spirit of human solidarity.

Every year, the United Nations publishes its Human Development Report, which offers a sort of reflection on the effectiveness of power around the world; a progress report on achieving the goal of "humanization". Ever since the Report was first issued, a few decades ago, it has always been noted that "something" must be amiss, because we are always "worse off".

The gap between rich and poor

In our countries, the few want for nothing, while the many want for almost everything. There is no status symbol that cannot be obtained. In the "poor countries" of the world, the "haves" can obtain the latest technology almost instantly. So it is that the Third World adapts faster to the market for new goods. Status tries to perpetuate itself. It is the rich man, Epulon ...! "There was a certain rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and feasted sumptuously every day. And there was a certain beggar, named Lazarus, who lay at his gate, full of sores. And desiring to be fed from the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: and even the dogs came and licked his sores."

As men and women of the twenty-first century, let us very carefully read and mull over the essential words of the story. Today, fewer and fewer people sit at Epulon's table (you can give him any name you wish even his own — this is my very personal decision). Fewer and fewer people eat more and eat better with every passing day. We talk about "quality of life", and it will be rather difficult to understand "the culture of waste". We accept only what is perfect, or what, according to the canons, is of the "highest quality". We throw away everything else.

Lazarus collects "the leftovers", but we must understand that the number of Lazarus-like figures has grown in an incredible way, that there is no room under the table and that, in spite of everything that is left over, there are not enough crumbs to go round.

One cynic said that the solution to every social problem was to let more and more crumbs fall from the table to those clamouring beneath it.

There are others among us who think that we need to pull up more chairs and benches to make more room at the table and give more people a place in society.

Many are surprised at the idea of seeing more people at that table, playing a dignified part in development.

At this time I am fondly reminded of cats and dogs. Have you not seen how they have no problem recognizing other cats and dogs, no matter what their breed,

colour or pedigree. We unfortunate humans, however, do have a problem recognizing our own kind, and we suffer from it and struggle to overcome it. Even Aristotle shared this difficulty, saying that slaves were "animals very similar to ourselves". This was before Christ, and yet the same problem reappeared in the great age of great philosophy between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. We had to hold councils and synods to decide whether Indians and Negroes were human beings.

Even after all this, when we had decided that they were indeed human beings, and after we congratulated ourselves on our intelligence and enshrined our findings in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we again forgot and there is still discrimination according to race, skin colour, gender and, what is worst, income.

There should be no surprise in finding that women suffered the same fate and had to fight hard to win their position in society.

Now, the problem has returned with another face. People in Europe and the United States are wondering if migrants are human, like them. At the moment, Europeans see us as "South Americans" or "non-EU nationals".

We have the same debate over those on the margins of our societies, people who are so like us, and yet ...!

Xenophobia is back. It does not see skin colour, but it does see poverty and the harsh reality of being seated not at the table of the Lord, but under the table. I think that St. Paul, who said: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus", would tear at his hair if he could see today that, after so many years of Christianity, this is still not absolutely certain.

Then one naively asks, "What about the cold war?" The experts tell us it's over. Their analysts tell us "Now there is no barrier to progress. We are one: there are no Marxists or capitalists, just human beings full of dignity and optimism".

They found that "security" was henceforth clear, that it was necessary to use development to halt the "subversion of poverty".

The thinking was that poverty was the bitter enemy of democracy and that it could be overcome only by opening the door to "participation" — every person being part of, taking part in and taking their share of what was theirs.

There have been many fine words, extraordinary pieces of rhetoric and plan after plan, but so little has been achieved.

As the old saying goes, "Actions speak louder than words". I seriously wonder why every Government thinks it should reinvent the wheel, rather than working with what it has. Why are we always beginning something new?

The war of ideologies is over, but we are now in a worse war, waged by those who have nothing to lose. The fatalism of poverty is knocking at our doors, and we will all be guilty if we do not react in time.

The Lord says: "Deal thy bread to the hungry". This is not just a fine phrase, today it has become a pressing need.

Politics reborn

People wonder about the course of history, and when they have finished wondering about that, they wonder about the rebirth of politics. The main reasoning goes like this: "Politics is the use of power for the sake of the common good". However, the common good at its most basic level, the level of survival, does not lend itself to theories.

A poor person is one whose basic needs — for food, clothing, health, shelter, training and employment — are neither met nor fulfilled.

If you add up the figures, you will see and recognize all those who are already poor or who are threatened by poverty. The people on the edge of poverty are those who are at risk of losing their jobs. They are the young who suddenly realize that their studies have been in vain because there are no jobs to fulfil their aspirations.

Politics, if you look at the election platforms of all politicians, points to this and offers that. The first definition of politics is "the art of surviving together humanely".

Then we conclude that politics are failing, because politicians know what they should do but do not do it. Blame then begins to be laid, because nobody can say in this case, "Forgive them; for they know not what they do". Politicians know very well what they are doing or not doing. They are creating a debt which, unlike the "external" debt, cannot be forgiven. The social debt cries out to heaven and must be repaid.

Where are we headed then?

Having got to this point in our reasoning, we inevitably wonder, "where are we headed then?". Watchers of world events know that we are standing on a precipice. The war against Iraq is only one, and one of the most publicized, of 35 wars currently going on in the world, with an unimaginable cost in human lives.

All of us in the world need to stop, get our bearings, and be able to face the challenge of poverty.

It is a painful admission to make, but if the money that we so freely put into our budgets for causing death was instead allocated to the sole task of preventing people from dying of hunger and thirst, that money would be ample to take care of the task. What is lacking is the necessary political will to recognize that we can buy security by sharing the hunger and poverty of our neighbours.

It is a shame to see self-styled "democrats" assume that people will be ardent defenders of democracy even if it has brought them nothing but deprivation.

We are no longer divided by ideology. If you take the example of América Nuestra, you will see the re-emergence of the popular movements of the past based on the determination and the decision to ensure, that people have something to eat.

It is not right that there should be people suffering from hunger and thirst in the third millennium. Survival is a right, and politicians must defend that right with all the means at their disposal.

Mankind is starving

Let us look back! Even as we advance into the twenty-first century; as we advance into the third millennium, the history of poverty, in all its phases, remains with us.

Somalia; Biafra, Albania, Ethiopia: we have all seen the terrible photographs and documentaries. Mozambique: hunger and AIDS. One could draw up an impressive list indeed. And yet, every country has its silent witnesses to hunger, that silent killer.

I remember when it was common for people to spread anxiety with talk of the North and the South. We would say: "Beware, do not forget that every north has its south, and every south its north". The wealthiest countries have large areas of poverty, and poor countries have pockets of unimaginable wealth.

We must do something if we are to begin to build lasting peace; which, in practical terms, means the capacity to meet people's basic needs for survival. Living together means providing the means to ensure that people do not die of want.

We have reached the end of the age of peaceful coexistence, when my sense of social responsibility taught me that I must do harm to no one the kind of social cruelty that allows us to let a man die from want, without bothering to help him to survive. Now we have entered the age of solidarity — an age in which we must not only avoid doing harm to our neighbour, but we must actually take care of him, regard him as our own, and share responsibility for his fate.

Albert Camus — despite being a non-believer, despite not having faith in Jesus Christ, despite not being a Christian — said that his reading of the Gospels had led him to an unshakeable ethic, according to which he could not be at peace as long as a single one of his brothers was suffering.

The most common kind of Christianity that you find is "cold war Christianity" — where we have still not moved towards love of one's neighbour. In Christianity, the "sins of omission" are often much more significant and painful than the sins of commission.

Christianity is about making a commitment to others. That is why it is essential that we initiate a new evangelization. How can I calmly accept the hunger of the poor man if he, in his faith, expects that I, in mine, repeat, in the name of the Lord, whose faith unites us, that the loaves and fishes should be multiplied, and that the water should be turned into wine?

We still await a miracle. How much solidarity must be shown in the face of the hunger that can be seen every day? How many community shelters must be opened? How many coats handed out, before we can achieve faith, the faith genuinely to believe that there is in every poor man the image of our God and Lord?

The excluded

There is no time to lose. To delay would be fatal. I recall how the 1995 Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development recognized poverty, unemployment, and social disintegration as closely related to security questions, and declared that there was an urgent need for a new global commitment to reduce the

profound inequalities that fuelled incendiary social conditions, ethnic hatreds, and environmental degradation.

Here in the Congress of the Republic, there are persons who know and understand this. You understand perfectly well that knowledge must be accompanied by political will and political decisions; that this is a permanent, continuous process that must be constantly reinforced by the active desire to serve one's neighbour!

But the evening is upon us. I recall how, as a boy, I used to hear people talk about "the poor". Then, years later, when I was a young man, we began to hear a word that bore an incredible, graphic force: "the marginalized". I was transported back to my school years, and to those exercise books with the vertical line on the left-hand side that you weren't allowed to cross with your pen: the margin. The "marginalized" existed outside the text; beyond the margin: they did not count. And yet they were still present; still in the textbook.

Now we have deteriorated further, and the word we use is equally graphic. Now we speak of the "excluded". These people do not exist even in the margin. They live outside the textbook; beyond our reality!

How absurd! We are returning to the worst of times, which we thought had been defeated by civilization, and we are returning without a care for the "social cost" of our return, to the injustices that we thought had been overcome.

The number of "excluded" grows. They are different from the "poor" that we used to know. The "excluded" know who they are, and they want to escape their situation at all costs. They are willing to risk anything because they have nothing to lose. They possess a historical unconscious, and they know that ultimately — in their bodies, in their blood, in the memories of others — they will prevail. Those "excluded" whom we used to call "migrants" were abused, but their heirs now form part of the soul and body of the society that sought to cast them aside.

The "excluded" of today feel that it will be more difficult to be accepted. They come and they stay. Migration represents the excluded in motion: those who have burned their boats and who claim, demand, and will still take up arms to assert a right that they are not willing to discuss. There is no time for words, they say. Reality speaks for itself.

Yes, I know that we must insist on human rights, but I want to state that, before we think about human rights, we must tend to human needs. I have noticed that those who defend rights — at least very many of them — do not commit themselves to something as concrete and real as the man who stands before them and declares: "I am hungry", or the woman who tells them to their faces that she has no food to give her children, or those to whom we say "Find work", as if this were some sort of formula for success, not knowing that work was the first thing that poverty abandoned.

The fourth world

My dear friends, the fourth world has arrived; a world that is in fact far more sorrowful than the third world. This fourth world describes the plight of those excluded from the society of opulence. And it is a cancer that will tear that society apart, if we do not act now!

The solution is clear: it is called development and it is the progeny of two parents: social justice and human dignity. One without the other is meaningless; they must go together. This solution only requires a "conversion to the human" — it is also a very Catholic solution, too, since "man is the path of the church".

This is not the kind of wisdom that can be learned in universities or great academies. As the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis once remarked, it was first learned when the anguished Cain beheld the misfortune and frailty of Abel and decided to kill him (but for love!)

The road to globalization

My dear friends, the dawn of globalization is upon us, in the form of its first war. And this war will bring more poverty. We must continue to insist on the truth of peace. Now, through the will of mankind, death has arrived. It is deplorable. However, globalization of the economy or of politics, should not disturb us. It should not disturb us if we can clearly and courageously fulfil a prerequisite, which has the power to transform. The prerequisite is the "globalization of solidarity".

If this form of globalization does not take place, all the other facets of globalization will destroy us. Economic globalization without the globalization of solidarity will mean the suicide of the poor, and hence, of most of mankind.

I still recall when the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, put forward this idea, at the Synod of America. He was clairvoyant. He had the ability to see beyond history; he has the ability to see beyond history, as history has demonstrated to the world that a globalization that is devoid of values is a globalization devoid of value.

We must open our eyes. We are heading not just towards the globalization of markets (which means the concentration of wealth), but also towards the globalization of poverty. As far as the poor are concerned, that means accepting that all hope has been lost.

Several days ago I came across the following maxim: "That which is morally false cannot be economically correct".

The present state of the world will make us decide to destroy ourselves or to recover the traces of authentic hopes; those that grow to the rhythm of the Gospel and that are stamped by it. I once had occasion to read a book published by Ediciones Carlos Lohle. It was about a man who made love of the poor his very reason for living. This was the Abbé Pierre, who told a select audience in "the Big Apple": "I have not come to ask for money, but for much more! Money rots away when it is not accompanied by the gift of the self, by one's presence alongside those who suffer. Philanthropy without real love for one's neighbour does not bring salvation, it brings ruination!"

If we look closely at the world we must realize that the first great struggle is against poverty, against selfishness, against indifference, and against conformism. We must see that poverty is the greatest enemy of peace!

We must strengthen justice and approve the Constitutional Justice Act, and thus confirm the authority of the Supreme Court of Justice to interpret the Constitution.

The Gospel remains vitally relevant and full of challenges. It tells us that we must be reborn in the waters of the Spirit, experience the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, by imitating him, and, in the eyes of our neighbour, see the Lord, who will ultimately declare at the Last Judgement: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me".

I came here this morning to share the joys and the hopes of a pastor of the church who received as his inheritance this cherished archdiocese of Tegucigalpa, and to thank the Lord for entrusting me with this mission!

And I have come to tell you the truth of my life. Let us not look for truth where it does not exist. Let us open the Gospel and there we shall find the truth of truths, spoken with the love and the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ: Do not forget, my beloved, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life".

I thank you.

Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga
Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras
8 December 2003